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Arthur E. Strout

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Arthur E. Strout
(Interviewer: Mike Hastings)

GMOH# 133
August 21, 2009

Mike Hastings: The following is a recorded interview of the Senator George J. Mitchell Oral History Project, an activity of Bowdoin College. It is Friday, August 21, 2009, my name is Mike Hastings. The interviewee is Arthur E. Strout; the interview is taking place in Camden, Maine, at his residence. I'd like to begin, Mr. Strout, if you could start for identification purposes by giving me your full name, and spelling your surname.

Arthur Strout: My name is Arthur Edwards Strout; Strout is spelled S-T-R-O-U-T.

MH: And could I have your date and place of birth.

AS: I was born in Rockland, Maine, on the 6th of September, 1935.

MH: And lastly, your full names for your mother and your father.

AS: My mother's name was, her maiden name was Olive Mabel Edwards, and my father's full name was Alfred Meserve Strout.

MH: Could you do a kind of a short, brief profile about your mother and father?

AS: My father was an attorney, practiced in Rockland, Maine, for many years. My mother was basically at home most of the time, she had worked in the registry of deeds in Knox County at one point, I think that is where she met my father. My father was from a family that had long roots in the United States, my mother's father was an immigrant from England, and her mother was the daughter of English immigrants.

MH: And your dad, you say he was a lawyer?

AS: He was a lawyer, and -

MH: Did he go to law school, or would he read for the law?

AS: Oh, no-no, he was a graduate of Bowdoin College, and he was a graduate of Harvard University in law, and in terms of connection with Bowdoin, his great uncle graduated from Bowdoin in 1857, I believe it was, and my father graduated from Bowdoin, I did, and my youngest son graduated from Bowdoin, too. So we have a somewhat long history on that side

with Maine and the college, and on the other side of my family it's basically a family of immigrants.

MH: I try to prepare for these interviews and use the Internet to the best of my ability, and I did find one other Arthur Strout, who was a doctor from Gardiner, is that a relation? (And went to Bowdoin.)

AS: No, no relation at all. I'm sure going back to some relationship, but I think in a generational line, that I was the only Strout from that line, going back to the early 1800s.

MH: So, but you were quite familiar with Bowdoin by the time you arrived there.

AS: Yes, I was, I had gone there, my father would go to football games and I'd go down with him on occasion.

MH: Now, are you the only child in that family?

AS: Yes, I am.

MH: Okay, and so your early years were in Rockland.

AS: My early years were in Thomaston. I was born in Rockland because that's where the hospital was, but I grew up in Thomaston, went to school in Thomaston, and attended, also attended Hebron Academy.

MH: Hebron, okay.

AS: Before I went to Bowdoin.

MH: Tell me about growing up in Thomaston, what was that like?

AS: Growing up in Thomaston was, looking back on it, quiet, interesting. The whole coastal area, up until you got into the latter '50s, 1950s, had been a depressed area since about the time of the First World War. The lime business and the shipbuilding business had basically collapsed, and there really wasn't very much money around. But you grew up among people of different levels of education, different views, different amounts of money, and we all lived together quite nicely.

MH: So when did you leave the schools in Thomaston to go to Hebron?

AS: Just what would have been my last year in high school, 1952, and I went to Hebron in the fall of 1952 and graduated the next year in 1953, when I entered Bowdoin.

MH: Now, Hebron at the time was run by Claude Allen, wasn't it?

AS: It was.

MH: Was he already on his motorcycle by then?

AS: Claude Allen still rode a motorcycle. I didn't feel he rode it very well, but yes, he did ride a motorcycle.

MH: Famous educator.

AS: Yes.

MH: Very good, and so you were just one year then at Hebron.

AS: Just one year at Hebron, yes.

MH: And did you feel well prepared for Bowdoin when you got done with that one year at Hebron?

AS: Extremely, and the first year at Bowdoin was a breeze through. I would say the year I had a Hebron was perhaps the best year of education in my life, followed by probably my first year in law school.

MH: Why did you go to Hebron, was it to get better study skills, or were you an athlete that wanted to do an extra year, or -?

AS: No, it would have been, it was recommended that I would learn more at Hebron. I never had a problem with studying or study skills, I was lucky; I could breeze through courses and examinations. I might have been better off if it wasn't, hadn't been so easy, I might have learned more. However, that's a different issue, not why we're here.

MH: Was it always a foregone conclusion that you were going to go to Bowdoin after all this family history?

AS: It probably was. After I got out of Hebron, I had applied to Bowdoin, and Claude Allen, who you mentioned, suggested that I go to Harvard, and he got me an admission to Harvard but the family did not approve of that, so I went to Bowdoin.

MH: Tell me a little bit about Claude Allen and what he was like as a school master.

AS: He wasn't a warm, friendly guy; I felt that he was remote. I never took any classes from him. I think he came from Deerfield and that Hebron had been perhaps suffering in the past and he came as an administrator to bring it together. I think he accomplished that. There were several excellent teachers on the staff there. I remember particularly a man by the name of Ned

[Edward] Willard, I [had] never really seen a teacher quite like that before, and there were others too. The quality of the instruction there was just excellent.

MH: What did Ned Willard teach?

AS: English.

MH: Were there other, when you entered Bowdoin, were there other classmates from Hebron who were with you?

AS: Yes.

MH: How many, I mean not exactly, but would you have a handful or -?

AS: Four or five I think, four or five, yes.

MH: And so you would have entered in the, I think when we talked on the phone you said that you were a freshman when George Mitchell was a senior? Is that right?

AS: Yes, I entered in '53, and I understand, and I believe George graduated in '54, so he would have been a senior at that time.

MH: Do you recall when you first met him?

AS: It would have been in the fraternity house; I was pledged to Sigma Nu fraternity, where my father had actually been, too. And he was there, I can't recall if he was president of the house at the time or not, but all my contact with him was, at that time, was through the fraternity.

MH: Tell me about Bowdoin when you went there. I noted that you said that your best years of your education were your year at Hebron and then your first year at law school, so -

AS: Well, I did very well at Bowdoin, and I have to say I never cared for it. I never had much contact with the professors – probably my fault, I mean I don't blame them for that. Looking back at it, Kenneth Sills, who had been the president for years, I think had retired or died not too many years before that, and the president at the time was [James] Stacy Coles. He struck me as kind of an academic and a man without much dynamism and drive, charisma and anything like that. Bowdoin was a good school. Student housing at Bowdoin, then under the fraternity system mostly, was miserable, and although I was pledged to a fraternity I never lived in the fraternity, I did not want to live in the fraternity, I preferred a more calm existence. And I think in latter years that the school's taken a better handle on the accommodations for the students and that's changed, but in my judgment, in the years that I was there, it was disgraceful. And some of that may have been because of the pressures after the Second World War, dealing with the people coming out of the service and so forth and so on that they, it just took time to pull things together. But those are my particular views on the college at that point. Having said

that, I got a good education, there's no question about that.

MH: Did you have a lot of returned soldiers in your classes?

AS: No, that had, the Second World War group had gone through, there were a few that had been in Korea that had come back. I roomed for a couple of years in Moore Hall, my roommate was, had been in the navy during Korea, and actually on a destroyer that had been sunk, and there were a handful of those, but the Second World War people had all cleared through by that time.

MH: So I take it there weren't any particular professors that you were enamored of.

AS: No, the only professor that, and that may be because of things that interested me that, a man by the name of Reinhard [Lunde] Korgen who was in the mathematics department at that time, and in my next to the last year I took a course from him in semantics and a lot of that dealt with Boolean algebra, which is the basics of the computer system, back there, and I got a good footing in the Boolean logic which, an area that's always interested me. And he to me is the one I felt I learned the most from. I took English courses from Professor [Herbert Ross] Brown, and he was an interesting fellow.

MH: As did I.

AS: Okay.

MH: We actually had a fair number of professors that overlapped. Did you ever contemplate a career in mathematics?

AS: No, I enjoyed mathematics and I didn't do as much as I would have liked to in mathematics because, I won't get into the details, but before I went I hadn't taken in high school for some reason, trigonometry and geometry, and I started out in mathematics and it just didn't work, I was too far behind. I took some specialized courses, one that has logically served me well which was the mathematics of finite intervals, kind of reverse topology that was an interesting intellectual study. At one time I was thinking of doing the three-year Bowdoin/two-year MIT, but I didn't do that. I don't think I've ever had much interest in what I would call the academic side of the education that I had. I've told many people, when they talk about being a lawyer, and I tell them, I say, "You have to remember that being a lawyer is not much different than being a plumber. You have clients who pay you to do certain things, and if anyone goes to law school because they want to make the world a better place to live, they're probably likely to be disappointed."

MH: Did you go to law school immediately after Bowdoin?

AS: I did, yes.

MH: So that would have been, so you would have started law school in the fall of -

AS: 'Fifty-seven, and graduated in 1960. I clerked for a judge in the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, and then went to work for the tax division of the Justice Department in Washington.

MH: I did find somewhere on the internet a little biographical paragraph about you and I wondered, did you continue throughout your career focusing on tax law?

AS: I did tax, money management and, mostly taxes and finance.

MH: That interests me, because most of the lawyers that I know in Maine seem to have general practices where they do a bit of everything.

AS: Well I didn't come back to Maine until 1972, when my father died. And when I came back there weren't many in the area that had the knowledge of taxes that I did at that point, and so you had general practices that you did too, but I represented some families on two or three, particularly on estate planning, that were kind of complicated family situations that went on for years and years and years, including a family in the fishing business.

MH: After law school did you, when did you reconnect with George Mitchell? I mean you obviously, he was only there for one year when you were at Bowdoin, I noted that you were a supporter of his when he was in the Senate, and I just wondered where your paths crossed after -

AS: He was a senior when I was a freshman, but I know that he was at Bowdoin in some capacity for at least one year after that, and I'm not sure exactly when or why. I knew him there, I think one time when I was back here, when he was district attorney, there was a kid who had come across the border up by Calais with something in his suitcase that he shouldn't have had in his suitcase and I had some discussions and met up with George on that. When he ran for office, I liked George, I always respected George, I made contributions to his campaigns. And I would see him, not often but once in a while, and supported him in his political campaigns and supporting others that he was supporting.

MH: Did you have an interest in politics from a young age, or no?

AS: No, not particularly.

MH: When you were growing up in the midcoast, this was pretty Republican territory.

AS: It was. And I will say, much to the dismay of my family, I have never voted for a Republican as president. My first time I voted was the second Eisenhower term, and I voted for Adlai Stevenson and have never voted for a Republican. I think probably my politics run substantially to the left of either of our two parties.

Another contact I had with Mitchell, my son Charles worked with him for a year as a, not

worked for him, was a Senate page for a term or so in Washington.

MH: And what does he do now?

AS: He does things on computers that I don't understand, and when I have a problem with my computer I will call him up for an answer and he will say things like, 'oh dad, you see that little red button down in the left hand corner, push that, dad.' Very embarrassing.

MH: You have just the one son?

AS: I have two sons, two sons.

MH: Two sons, I see, do they live nearby?

AS: No, Charles lives in Manhattan and Alfred lives in St. Louis, Missouri.

MH: Did either of them go to Bowdoin?

AS: Charles.

MH: Charles did.

AS: Charles went to Bowdoin.

MH: What year did he graduate?

AS: I think '92.

MH: Now, you live in Boston now.

AS: I do. When I retired, actually I bought a condo in Boston about ten years ago, and I've been a Massachusetts resident for the last six.

MH: So you don't practice in Boston.

AS: Well, no, I'm trustee of a trust from a former friend/client, and I've been handling that down in Boston.

MH: Now you're, in my research to prepare for the interview, you're on the bank board here, or you were?

AS: I was on the board of directors of Camden National Bank for about twenty-five years, and they had an age termination of seventy, so when I became seventy I was off the board.

MH: Were you on other boards here in the midcoast?

AS: I was on the board of Pen Bay Hospital for a while, that was about it. I didn't really participate very much in the local political and social things, it's just not my style.

MH: What do you think of George Mitchell's current activities?

AS: I think he's done a good job. And looking back on George, from the time I first knew him, I mean he's a steady person. He's respected, he's well liked, he's not arrogant, he's bright, he's a worker. When he was at Bowdoin, I mean George didn't have any money at Bowdoin, he worked as a steward of the fraternity house, he worked as a dorm proctor, he was in ROTC and so forth, but he was working all the time. And he was liked and he was respected, but he wasn't what I would call a big man on campus type, the blustery type, he was just a steady guy who worked and had a good mind. And so I liked him, and I always respected him and I felt that, if he was elected office, I had reasonable confidence that he would not do something that would drive me up the wall.

MH: Did you ever, when he was in the Senate, did he ever stop by here to see you, or -?

AS: No, no-no-no, we weren't friends of that kind. I'd run into him here and there. George has also got a good sense of humor, which unfortunately he didn't seem to be able to project when he was running for governor.

MH: You're not the first one who's said that.

AS: No, he was not a good, he may have been too honest to be a good political candidate, frankly. I think recently here in Maine, I think to some extent the same thing may have happened to Tom Allen, who I also know very well. I remember one time we were at a small political fund raiser, locally, all local people, and there was a lady talking to George, it was a lady I knew so I came up and I gave her a pinch and she turned around, and it wasn't the lady I knew and I said, "Oh my God," I said, "I'm sorry, I thought you were so-and-so." And Mitchell looks at her and says, "He always says that, he always says that." But I like George, and I have a saying that if in times of difficulty, George is among the people that you like to have in your trench or in your lifeboat or something like that.

MH: That's probably a good way to end it. I thank you very much.

AS: Okay.

End of Interview